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ABSTRACT

A teacher describes what happens when professional writers are invited into his college composition classroom to talk about and show the processes they employ in revising their work, and reports that students benefit not only by hearing about but also by actually seeing successive drafts. In the class, the students begin the semester by analyzing revisions of their own writing, using a chart similar to one devised by Nancy Sommers for her study, "Revision in the Composing Process." Late in the semester, students again examine revisions with the chart and write an analysis of the ways in which they have progressed during the semester. Teachers can find many authors who are willing to speak to classes; many come through towns on book tours and many are employed by universities. Some writers will donate manuscripts to schools; some will respond with personal letters when students write to them. While teachers often tell students about the value of revision and provide many models of successful products, bringing writers into the classroom also provides models of the actual process. (A sample syllabus and a revision chart are attached.) (SG)

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Professional Writers Don't Write Like That, So Why Should You?

Alix Schwartz, University of California, Berkeley

I have been studying English for all of my adult life, but I never revised anything I wrote until I tackled the prospectus for my dissertation. There was never the time or the incentive to revise--another paper was always due, another semester was always about to begin. Neither had I ever shown anyone a piece of writing I considered "unfinished" until I was obliged to show drafts of my prospectus to the members of my study group. Although I was putting my students into peer-editing groups, I had never sat in one myself.

The other day I was talking with a dear friend who has published several books. He told me that writing is the most public activity he engages in. I was surprised. I had always thought of writing as one of my most private activities. During our conversation, I suddenly realized that my efforts to radicalize my classroom, to help my students see themselves as real writers, were all part of an unconscious parental impulse: I want my students to have it better than I did. I see now that my image of myself as a writer, my whole approach to writing, has been shaped by an educational system that I disapprove of, a system that I refuse to perpetuate in my classroom, a system that has created a heirarchical dualism between the real writers and the students who produce what Robert Scholes has called "pseudo-non-literature."

I want my students to see themselves as "real" writers, to

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perceive the continuum along which all writers lie. In order to create an environment in which it will be possible for them to notice the similarities between their own work and the work of professional writers, I always bring in two or three published writers as guests during the course of the semester. After my students have read and discussed an essay by Michael Rogin on "Ronald Reagan, the Movie" or a piece by Jean Gonick, author of Mostly True Confessions, on eating disorders, and before they write their own essays in response to these works, they get a chance to interview the authors themselves. When a professional writer tells them, for example, that she always gets feedback from her friends before submitting a piece for publication, her comment is at least ten times as convincing as anything I could ever say about the benefits of peer editing. And when they hear an author who publishes regularly in The Nation talk about the countless times she revises an article before it meets her own expectations, they have concrete evidence for my seemingly implausible claim that the published essays they admire weren't created whole and perfect, at a single stroke.

The idea that it is her own expectations that the author is striving, first and foremost, to meet comes as a surprise to them. Students are trained to read the teacher's expectations, examining every word we say in class, and every cryptic marginal notation, so that the next paper, or the next draft of this paper, will conform more closely to the abstract model they imagine us to hold sacred in our minds. I like to put my

students in a position where each one becomes the judge of his or her own writing, to the extent that this is possible in a system requiring teachers to assign the ultimate grades. For this reason, I use the portfolio method. I won't go into detail about this method, even though it is central to the functioning of my class, because I'm focusing today on the benefits of bringing professional writers into the classroom. There are, however, several fine sessions on portfolios at this year's CCCC.

If hearing a professional writer talk about multiple drafts is helpful, actually <u>seeing</u> those drafts is even better. For this reason, I now ask the writers I invite to my class to provide me ahead of time with earlier drafts of the published pieces my students will be reading. One writer, Jackie Stevens, gave me <u>five</u> drafts of an article she wrote on Angela Davis. Because most of the interesting revision took place in the first two pages, and because my students would balk at reading so many versions of the same essay, I xeroxed the entire first and fifth drafts, but only pages one and two from the intervening drafts. My students got to witness first-hand the fascinating process whereby Ms. Stevens worked through from an initial blatant statement of her stance, so that she could clarify it in her own mind, to an opening that drew the potentially reluctant reader in more gradually, and effectively. They learned that many times a writer's consciousness of audience can be a vital, though late, step in the composing process.

A few of my students liked opening number four better than

opening number five, and when one of them asked the author to justify the final revision, she talked about the different effect she intended in each case. When my students get to read different, equally viable versions of such an article, or two stories by Raymond Carver that obviously grew from the same root, or two essays by Ishmael Reed on the same topic, one written for journal publication and the other for inclusion in his own book, they learn that literary works take different shapes for different contexts and functions.

The idea of the academic essay becomes truly "merely academic" in the face of all this evidence that <u>real</u> essays grow organically; they take the shape that turns out to best fit the developing ideas, and the developing sense of audience. Nowhere do we find evidence of an author starting with an empty mold, and pouring his or her pre-set ideas into it. When it comes to writing, real writing, there are no pre-set ideas, and no pre-set molds.

Those of you who use exploratory writing in your classes and in your own work already know about the discoveries that shape essays in often unexpected ways. Student writers, however, may not be familiar with a mode of writing and revising that depends on discoveries made along the way. I have always allowed my students to revise their papers as much as they wished, but before I began providing them with models of the revision process as it is practiced by professional writers, and before I began using the portfolio method, I was usually disappointed with the

superficial modifications they made in the name of "revision." Instead of new developments in their ideas, or bold experiments with structure, I found corrections of the grammatical errors I had marked, or minor changes on the level of the individual word, or at best the sentence. Clearly, my students in those days were evidence of the power of an educational system that can create such a convincing division between professional and student writers that the students will reproduce that division in their own acts of writing.

These days, in my composition class, the students begin the semester by analyzing their own revisions of their first essay, using a chart like the one Nancy Sommers uses in her study, Revision in the Composing Process. For those of you who haven't seen it, this chart provides a means of tabulating changes made on the level of the word, the phrase, the sentence, and the thema, in terms of the following operations: deletion, substitution, addition, reordering. I use this chart because it is simple enough for the students to use themselves. The first time I assigned this analysis as an in-class exercise, several of my students approached me to express their dismay at finding that their revisions "didn't fit on the chart" because they had made such radical changes in their essays after having received feedback from their peer groups. They were afraid they had done something wrong, whereas you and I know they had done everything right.

At the end of the semester, my students analyze their

revision strategies again, using the same chart, and write up an analysis of the specific ways in which they have progressed during the semester. This final analysis often serves to make conscious for them what I have already realized when reading their successive revisions: these students have healed the institutionalized division between student and professional writer--at least in terms of process; they have toppled the heirarchical dualism.

What happens between the beginning and end of the semester to make all this possible? A lot of writing, responding, and rewriting. And a lot of reading, especially the reading of multiple drafts and versions of published essays. Then, every so often, the workshop atmosphere of our class transforms into a kind of press conference, when my students get a chance to interview a professional writer. I'd like to spend a few minutes giving you an idea of what happens when an author visits my class. The students always ask a few questions about the content of the piece or pieces we have read. But--even before I began providing the students with early drafts and alternative versions--invariably the bulk of the questions address matters we would categorize under "process": "Where do you get your ideas?" "When did you start writing?" "Do you write with a pen, a typewriter, or a computer?" "What time of day do you usually write?" "How many drafts do you write?" "Do you ever show your drafts to anyone before sending them out?" "Do you ever get writer's block? How do you get over it?" Whether or not I draw

their attention to the act of revision, the concept of "process," they show me by their questions that they already care deeply about process.

If you can imagine the excitement sparked by the guest appearance of a professional writer in the classroom, I probably don't need to tell you about the inspiration these writers generate. One of my students wrote a highly un-academic essay describing a fantasy date with Jean Gonick, incorporating details from her cultural analyses of fashion, food and gender. His essay was so charming that when Ms. Gonick received it in the mail she called me on the phone to ask what he looked like, and was disappointed to learn that he was only twenty years old. Another student, after questioning Robert Pinsky on the intricate process of constructing a computer novel, structured his essay after the pattern of Pinsky's interactive fiction, Mindwheel: the reader could choose any of several branching paths through the essay. I'm certain Joselito will always treasure the enthusiastic note Mr. Pinsky sent him in response.

It's surprisingly easy to recruit professional writers for classroom visits. Every writer I have ever approached has seemed flattered that I am teaching his or her work, and that my students would like to meet him or her. I have approached writers during the book-signing following a public reading, I have written to them and called them on the phone. Because my school doesn't provide any funds with which I could pay these guests, I always offer to take them out for lunch after their

classroom visits. A few have taken me up on it; even more have reaped the rewards a writer probably values the most: an appreciative, attentive audience, and the raw materials for another piece of writing. Both Alice Kahn and Jean Gonick wrote and published essays inspired by their visits to my class.

Even if you don't live in a big city, you can still implement this idea. I'm willing to bet that every campus has professional writers on its faculty. Thanks to publish-or-perish policies, lots of us are published writers. And some of us probably even write readable essays that would generate vigorous class discussion and provide good models for student processes and products. Michael Rogin, for example, whose essay on Reagan I mentioned earlier, is a professor of Political Science at my home campus. And most English departments have poets and or novelists in residence.

It's also a good idea to keep track of the schedules for readings at local bookstores, and speakers' series in the various departments on your campus. It is often possible, if you plan in advance, to get a writer to visit your classroom if he or she is going to be in town for another, paid, event anyway.

Finally, if all else fails, you can increase your students' contact with writers through the mail. One semester I used an anthology called <u>Modern Poets Five</u> in my class. When several of my students wrote exceptional papers about poems they read in that collection, I decided to send these papers to the poets, in care of their publisher. One student, Kristine, wrote an

analysis of "A Butterfly," by Andrew Waterman. When Waterman, who lives in Ireland, received her paper in the mail, he sent her a very long letter, in which he responded to each of her points, and then described his current project to her. The written exchange between Andrew Waterman and Kristine should suggest an incentive, one of many, actually, for including the works of contemporary authors on one's reading list.

Of course, you can't send every student's paper to the author in question. The gratification Andrew Waterman derived from Kristine's paper would soon turn to dismay if I were to send him thirty-four six-page analyses of his poetry. But you can encourage your students to begin correspondences with the writers they admire. While it's true that many writers will be too busy to respond, many others will welcome the attention.

The moral--not to mention financial--support of good professional writers who are not yet famous is one of the more enjoyable responsibilities of our profession. But even writers who are out of our immediate reach--too famous or already dead--can be useful in a class such as the one I've been describing. You can mine the archives of your school's library, or the library of a neighboring university. Many writers donate or will their manuscripts to college libraries. Our school, for example, has Maxine Hong Kingston's typescripts.

If your library fails to yield enough good material, you can sometimes find draft versions published along with their polished counterparts: on the sample syllabus I'm about to distribute,

you'll see Frederick Douglas and Zora Neale Hurston, both of whose publishers have provided such evidence of the writing process. And the Faulkner manuscripts are available in published form. Also, many writers rework their stories in different styles, or from different points of view. The Faulkner selections and the stories from Raymond Carver, also on the syllabus, are examples of this.

In short, we tell our students we value process as well as product, but while we always provide lots of models of successful products, we almost never model the process itself. By bringing writers into the classroom, and getting them to provide drafts of their work for us to read, I give my students--and myself--a chance to see successful models of the writing process. By the end of the semester, we are able to place ourselves on the continuum that includes all writers.

Sample Syllabus for Composition Course Focusing on Revision

Alix Schwartz
1990 CCCC Presentation

M	Jan	23	Introduction
W		25	Brainstorming from Bill Blass ad
F		27	Draft due: 2 pp. Peer editing
M		30	Essay due: 2 pp. Analyze revision strategies
W	Feb	1	Sommers' case studies: student writers
F		3	Sommers' case studies: experienced writers
M		6	Holicek, Nguyen (Student Writers) (2 versions)
W		8	Lewis (Student Writers) (2 versions & peer response)
F		10	Draft due: 4 pp. Elbow on feedback
M		13	Draft groups
W		15	Essay due: 4 pp. Guest: McQuade on portfolios
F		17	**Feminist Writers** Griffin: two rape essays
M		20	Presidents' Day Holiday
W		22	Stevens: "When a Man Kills a Woman"
F		24	Stevens on Angela Davis: 5 drafts
M		27	Guest: Jackie Stevens
W	Mar	1	Draft due: 5 pp. Workshop: Audiences
F		3	Draft groups
M		6	Essay due: 5 pp. **Minority Voices** Reed: 2 versions
W		8	Guest: Ishmael Reed
F		10	Douglass: 1st and 2nd versions
M		13	Hurston: draft and polished
W		15	Johnson, Field (Student Writers)
F		17	**Draft due: 5 pp. Workshop: Development**

M-F March 20-24 Spring Recess

M	Mar	27	Draft groups: 1st revision deadline
W		29	Essay due: 5 pp. **The Editing Process:** Woman Warrior
F		31	"No Name Woman" and chapter proofs
M	Apr	3	"White Tigers" and chapter proofs
W		5	"Shaman"
F		7	No class: Attend Minority Writers Series (Moraga: drafts of forthcoming play provided in advance)
M		10	"At the Western Palace"
W		12	"Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" Draft due: 6 pp.
F		14	Draft groups
M		17	Essay due: 6 pp. Lanham: from Revising Prose
W		19	**Dead White Males**' Carver: "The Bath"
F		21	Carver: "A Small, Good Thing"
M		24	Faulkner: "Spotted Horses"
W		26	Faulkner, "The Peasants"
F		28	Faulkner fragment, from ms. to ts. to published
M	May	1	Draft due: 6 pp.
W		3	Draft groups
F		5	Essay due: 6 pp.
M		8	Revising hiatus begins
W		10	Assess personal revising strategies
F		12	Party! Portfolios (containing all revisions) due

Chart for Recording
Frequency of Revision

from Nancy Sommers'
Revision in the Composing Process

	Deletion	Substitution	Addition	Reordering	Total
Word					
Phrase					
Sentence					
Thema					
Total					